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ABSTRACT

The study explored the effect of membership in nonpolitical voluntary associations upon the degree of political activity of members. In particular, the authors asked whether or not these effects were found in a relatively uniform pattern across different age groups. On the basis of the reported levels of political discussion in 14 types of nonpolitical associations, memberships were categorized as either apolitical or neopolitical. Apolitical associations provided absolutely no opportunity for political activity or discussion; neopolitical associations provided a small degree of opportunity for political activity or discussion. Participants were surveyed concerning the amount of political activity they engaged in, ranging from voting to attendance at political meetings and making political donations. Findings are that members of both neopolitical and apolitical associations are more politically active than nonmembers, and that members of neopolitical associations are more active than members of apolitical associations. Older respondents differed from the rest of the population only in that their levels of political work and political talk were somewhat lower than levels of younger members. Tables showing response data are included. (Author/AV)

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POLITICAL RESOURCES FOR THE ELDERLY: THE IMPACT OF MEMBERSHIP
IN NONPOLITICAL VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATIONS UPON POLITICAL ACTIVITY

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Political Resources For The Elderly: The Impact of Membership
in Nonpolitical Voluntary Associations upon Political Activity

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The politics of any nation are strongly affected by population dynamics. As one consequence of the increased fertility of the 1940s and 1950s and the decreased fertility of the 1970s, the United States is evolving into a substantially older population than it has been in the past (Cutler, 1977a, 1977b; Cutler & Harootyan, 1975). Among the policy responses to this actual and anticipated demographic change, and reflecting other political dynamics as well, are programs and agencies such as Medicare, Supplemental Security Income, the Older Americans Act, the Administration on Aging, legislation concerning age discrimination and pension reform, cost-of-living escalators in Social Security, the National Institute on Aging, and a national network of locally-based Area Agencies on Aging.

The political resources marshalled on behalf of the elderly come from several directions. An increasing age consciousness on the part of the elderly themselves could lead to various forms of direct, popular political influence (Cutler, 1975, 1976; Kerschner, 1976; Weaver, 1976). The evolution of large bureaucratically rationalized, and multiple-issue national associations representing the aged is another important political resource — especially when compared to the more localized, charismatic leader, single-issue old age groups of the past (Pratt, 1976). Furthermore, despite lingering societal stereotypes to the contrary, recent analysis suggests that aging is correlated

with neither a substantial drop-off or "disengagement" in political interest, awareness, and activity, nor with social policy conservatism (Bengston & Cutler, 1976; Cutler, 1977a; Glenn, 1969; Glenn & Grimes, 1968).

An alternative viewpoint is that older people do not and will not in the foreseeable future have much political influence: "If government responds positively to the challenge of expanding services and facilities [for the aged], it will be because of pervasive ideological considerations and not because it was pushed to do so by senior power" (Binstock, 1974). While such a prediction is difficult to substantiate, it is also true that there is no definitive evidence proving that "gray power" or "senior advocacy" is the key to recent sociopolitical changes which benefit the elderly.

Any answer, of course, is likely to be between the two extremes of pervasive old age influence and no old age influence. One social mechanism which accommodates both perspectives is that of the voluntary association, through which the efforts of older persons can become joined with the efforts of other interests. Simultaneously, membership and involvement in even non-political voluntary associations, as the present research suggests, can serve to engender the political skills and awareness that may lead to increased levels of political activity of various kinds.

The major problem in looking to involvement in manifestly political associations as an answer to "senior power" is that so few people actually belong to such organizations. Based upon the Michigan Center for Political Studies presidential surveys, for example, Table 1 demonstrates the "elite" nature of membership in political groups. With estimates such as these, it is unlikely that many older persons are involved in or personally benefit from manifestly political voluntary associations.

When we consider voluntary associations in general, however, the situation is different. Employing both cross-sectional and longitudinal research designs, a number of recent studies suggests that older persons are involved in such activity and do not drop out as a simple consequence of aging (e.g., Babchuk & Booth, 1969; S.Cutler, 1976, 1977). Furthermore, when nationally representative samples are analyzed using appropriate statistical adjustments for the obvious socioeconomic differences between young and old (Cutler, 1977c), and when age-appropriate typologies are used in assessing membership patterns for young and old (Cutler, 1977d), it is apparent that older persons are well represented in the ranks of voluntary association members.

The present analysis is thus derived from two sets of factors, i.e.: (a) mechanisms by which older persons may influence politics and public policy, and (b) the involvement of older persons in voluntary associations. The specific question confronted in this research, consequently, concerns the effects upon political activity of membership in nonpolitical voluntary associations. In particular, we are concerned with whether or not these effects are found in a relatively uniform manner across different age groups. As Table 3 (which is introduced subsequent to the next section) demonstrates, involvement in certain kinds of voluntary associations is indeed associated with increased levels of political activity. If membership in nonpolitical voluntary associations serves to increase levels of political activity in younger but not older persons, however, then the voluntary association involvements of older persons have less political relevance.

The organizing hypothesis of the present study, therefore, is that the processes of political activation set in motion by membership in non-political voluntary associations operate for the old as well as the young.

DATA AND PROCEDURES

As demonstrated by Table 1, studies of political attitudes and behavior typically include a question on membership in manifestly political organizations. In the past decade, however, an increasing number of national studies has included a "check-list" of many different types of voluntary associations. One study, however, went beyond the simple elicitation of membership information and asked each respondent who indicated one or more memberships if the indicated organization(s) was a site of political discussion. Thus the door is opened for the potential political impact, on the individual, of even nonpolitical voluntary associations. This study is the 1967 national survey designed by Sidney Verba and Norman Nie which provides the basis of their award-winning Participation in America (1972).

Each respondent was asked about membership in each of fifteen different types of voluntary associations. Rather than just comparing members versus nonmembers, however, the present analysis begins by sorting the association types into those which, on the basis of the total sample, are more versus less often the site of political discussion. Table 2 presents a rank ordering of the voluntary association types in terms of the sample percentages of political discussion as reported by the members of each type. The range is rather large. As would be expected, members of manifestly political clubs and groups report the highest level of political discussion, 97%; at the other end of the range, only 20% of the members of sports groups report that political discussions take place in those groups. The unique role of manifestly political organizations in this regard is noted by the 34% gap between them and the organization with the next highest level of reported political discussion.

While prior research demonstrates that members of political clubs are more politically active than nonmembers, our interest is in the potential influence of membership in the fourteen nonpolitical association types listed in Table 2. Based on the ranking of levels of political discussion in these nonpolitical associations, we dichotomized them, and will separately analyze the political activity levels of members of the two sets of associations. While any dichotomization can be arbitrary, it is interesting to note that a gap of ten percentage points separates School Service groups from Unions. Both sets of voluntary associations, it should be kept in mind, are nonpolitical in their manifest description, and their categorization here is determined solely by the amount of political discussion which takes place in them, as reported by members. Since it would be rather cumbersome to refer to them as "less political nonpolitical" voluntary associations and "more political nonpolitical" voluntary associations, the labels Apolitical and Neopolitical, respectively, shall be used.

The categorization of individuals into these two sets of voluntary associations employed the following procedures. If an individual belonged to one or more associations none of which was a Neopolitical association, he or she was placed in the Apolitical category. If a respondent belonged to at least one of the Neopolitical associations, then she or he was placed into that category, even if the respondent belonged also to one or more Apolitical voluntary associations. Unfortunately, limitations of sample size do not allow us to separately analyze individuals according to the actual number of Neopolitical memberships held.

It should be noted that the classification of a respondent into the Neopolitical or Apolitical categories is based on that individual's pattern of voluntary association memberships rather than whether or not he actually

reported engaging in political discussions. Thus it is the typology of associations — a typology which hopefully will be useful in research based on other samples and surveys — and not the individual respondent's own discussion behavior which is being tested as the potential activator or accelerator of political activity. All members of Service Clubs, for example, are classified into the Neopolitical category even though only 64% of them (see Table 2) actually reported that political discussion takes place in their own service club. This will have a conservative effect upon our findings, since any observed differences in levels of political activity between members of Neopolitical and Apolitical associations will be observed despite the muting effect of this compositional issue. Indeed, even with the compositional issue, we find that members of Neopolitical associations are more active politically than are members of Apolitical associations (Table 3).

Analysis of the members of Apolitical and Neopolitical voluntary associations will be juxtaposed with two additional categories: (a) respondents who are not members of any of the association types listed in Table 2 (38% of the sample) — this category is mutually exclusive of the two categories already described; and members of manifestly political groups (8% of the sample) — who could also be members of the Apolitical or the Neopolitical categories.

Six standard survey measures of political activities are used to assess the impact of the four categories of voluntary association membership. Table 3 indicates, in the first column, the percentage of the total sample which reported undertaking each activity. (The text of each item and its associated responses is given in Appendix A.) In general, the six items represent an expected range of "popularity": most people vote in local and national elections, somewhat less than half the sample engages in persuasive political talking, and only a minority of the electorate in general does much else.

This ranking of percentages generally coincides with Milbrath's "Hierarchy of Political Involvement" which ranges from Spectator to Transitional to Gladiatorial Activities (1965, p. 18), with the exception that he lists political or campaign work as Gladiatorial, whereas in these 1967 data "political work" is a middle-range activity.

The main message of Table 3 is that increased levels of political activity across the four categories of voluntary association membership are in the expected direction for all six dependent variables. More to the point of the present analysis, however, are the findings that: (a) members of both Neopolitical and Apolitical associations are more politically active than nonmembers, and (b) members of Neopolitical associations are more active than members of Apolitical associations, a significant finding since Neopolitical is a subcategory of nonpolitical voluntary associations.

Finally, one generalization to emerge from a recent review of dozens of studies of voluntary association activity was that membership is strongly related to socioeconomic status (Cutler, 1977c). Representative summary comments include: "Regardless of the measures of status and organizational participation, studies show that the higher the socioeconomic status, the higher tends to be the rate of participation in organizations" (Erbe, 1964, p. 199); and "The positive association between membership in voluntary associations and socioeconomic status is one of the best documented relationships in the sociological literature" (Hodge & Treiman, 1968, p. 722). Consequently, using Multiple Classification Analysis procedures, all comparisons among the three mutually-exclusive categories of Neopolitical, Apolitical, and Nonmembers are adjusted for compositional differences in income, education, and sex. (The latter was included since the literature review also identified sex as being substantially related to voluntary association membership.)

Thus the levels of political activity reported for the separate categories of voluntary association membership are not the artifactual result of the differential socioeconomic composition of the separate categories.

RESULTS

In considering the results of our analysis, it is important to maintain the distinction between the assumption of the research and the hypothesis to be tested. The assumption has been that political activity increases as one moves through the voluntary association typology from nonmember to Apolitical to Neopolitical. By contrast, the hypothesis is that whatever the relationship between activity and membership is, that relationship will be the same for older and younger respondents. Table 3 demonstrated that the assumption is correct for the total sample; the bottom line of that table, for example, indicates that the average of all six activity measures, like each of the six, does vary as assumed.

As a first step in testing the hypothesis, Table 4 presents the mean percentage across the six activity measures for each of the age groups and types of voluntary association membership. Each age group faithfully and monotonically reproduces the assumed pattern; that is, within each of the four age groups, members of Apolitical voluntary associations have a higher average participation level than nonmembers, and members of Neopolitical associations have a higher score than the Apolitical. And, for purposes of comparison, members of political groups have the highest levels of political activity. Thus it may be concluded that both the assumption and the hypothesis are valid.

An examination of the age/membership patterns for each separate measure, in Table 5, however, produces a somewhat more complex picture. Interestingly, three patterns emerge, one for the most "popular" political activities, one for the two middle-range, and one for the two most difficult or "elite" political activities. For the two voting measures, the most "popular" of the Spectator Activities, there is weakened evidence of our assumption, since the difference between the Apoliticals and the Neopoliticals, except for the youngest respondents, is small. As assumed, however, there are typically large differences between members of nonpolitical voluntary associations and nonmembers. Nonetheless, the hypothesis is supported, since the pattern is the same for the older respondents.

For the two middle-range political activities, "political talk" and "political work," the assumed membership-related increases in activity are found for all the age groups except the oldest. For all the other age groups members of Neopolitical voluntary associations are more active than members of Apolitical associations; for the oldest respondents, there is no difference between the two types of members. The assumption is supported across the whole range of membership types, in that for all age groups members of nonpolitical associations are more active than nonmembers, and members of political clubs are the most active of all. Nonetheless, we must conclude that the basic hypothesis is not supported, since the oldest age group does not share the pattern observed for the Apolitical and Neopolitical types.

Finally, for the two most "elite" forms of political activity, both the assumption and the hypothesis are supported. In all age groups, members of Neopolitical associations reported higher levels of attendance at political meetings and giving political donations than members of Apolitical associations. And with only one minor exception (younger nonmembers who enjoy

making political donations), members are more active than nonmembers, but less active than members of political clubs.

SUMMARY & CONCLUSIONS

Our research focuses on membership in voluntary associations as a political resource of the elderly, examining the potential influence of membership on a range of political activities. In a sense the results are presented in a rather conservative manner; the efficacy of voluntary association membership would be more dramatically portrayed if the respondents were simply divided into nonmembers vs. members (including Apolitical, Neopolitical, and political clubs). Although members of manifestly political clubs and groups exhibit higher levels of political activity than the general population, a relatively few people actually belong to such groups. Consequently, our research focuses on membership in nonpolitical voluntary associations, a kind of social involvement which is more widespread in the population, and becoming a particularly important focus of old-age activity.

In general it should be concluded that nonpolitical voluntary association membership does represent a political resource for the older population. Members of the oldest age group had higher levels of political activity than nonmembers for all six of the dependent variables. Some nonpolitical voluntary associations, however, are more potentially political than others, and on the basis of the reported levels of political discussion in fourteen types of nonpolitical associations, we analyzed Apolitical and Neopolitical association memberships separately.

Specifically, support was found for the hypothesis that older people are just as likely to benefit politically from Neopolitical membership as younger people. This turned out to be not much benefit at all in the case of voting, but a noticeable advantage in the case of the two most "elite" forms of political activity. Only for the two middle-level measures of political activity were the oldest respondents different from the rest of the population, but even here membership in nonpolitical voluntary associations can be considered a political resource. That is, although the oldest members of Apolitical and Neopolitical associations did not differ in their levels of "political talk" and "political work," members were still more active than nonmembers.

This analysis represents only a first examination of the relationships among political activity, nonpolitical voluntary association membership patterns, and age groups. Our results suggest at least some of the issues and questions which must be addressed through further analysis. For example, in considering the atypical result with respect to "political talk" and "political work," it may be that the main factors to investigate relative to older people are factors of health and physical well-being, or those of transportation and other access resources. Once such resources are available, the social activity and stimulation found in any kind of nonpolitical voluntary association may be enough to motivate at least some political activity.

Similarly, research in this area should consider general tendencies toward activity and activism as intervening factors. A social or personality orientation in this direction may bring some individuals both to voluntary associations and to political activity. Alternatively, however, it may be precisely among those with relatively weaker tendencies toward sociability or politics that membership in nonpolitical voluntary associations makes the

biggest political difference. At the same time, even if "activity predicts activity" in general, different kinds of social environments, such as Neopolitical versus Apolitical voluntary associations, may differentially serve to accelerate the political impact of social involvement.

Finally, we anticipate that the typology of nonpolitical voluntary associations developed here will be applicable to other analyses of organizational membership patterns. Since many available studies have included check-lists of association memberships quite similar to the list appearing in the present study, it should be possible to recreate the Neopolitical and Apolitical distinctions. The application of this approach to other studies suggests such possibilities as the replication and refinement of the findings noted here, the examination of these patterns over several years, and the analysis of a range of modes of political action that goes beyond election-related behaviors.

TABLE 1: Percent Belonging to Political Clubs, 1952-1972

1952	1956	1960	1964	1968	1972
2	3	3	4	3	3

SOURCE: Center for Political Studies, Presidential Surveys

TABLE 2: Percent of Members of Each Type of Voluntary Association Stating that Political Discussion Takes Place in their Association

Political Clubs 97			
Service Clubs	64	Unions	44
Farm Organization	61	Religious	40
Ethnic/Nationality	57	School Fraternity	37
Professional	57	Youth (leaders)	36
Literary	56	Social	35
Veterans	56	Fraternal	33
School Service	54	Sports	20
Mean	= 58	Mean	= 35
[Neopolitical]		[Apolitical]	

TABLE 3: Percent of Each Membership Category Engaging in
Six Political Activities

	TOTAL SAMPLE	Non- Members	Apolitical	Neopolitical	POLITICAL CLUBS
A. Local Voting	34	76	85	92	94
B. Presidential Voting	72	63	75	82	90
C. Political Talk	41	35	40	49	69
D. Political Work	26	19	24	34	71
E. Political Meetings	19	12	16	31	68
F. Political Money	13	9	11	19	49
Average, A - F	43	36	42	50	74

NOTE: Text of all items given in Appendix A.

TABLE 4: Average Percent of Six Political Activities (A - F)
by Membership Category and Age

Membership Category	21-35	36-50	51-64	65+
Nonmember	33	41	40	35
Apolitical	35	46	49	44
Neopolitical	47	53	56	50
Political Clubs	69	73	79	74

TABLE 5: Age Patterns of Political Activity for Different Types
of Voluntary Association Membership

	Non- Members	Apolitical	Neo- Political	Political Clubs
A. LOCAL VOTING				
21-35	69	79	83	84
36-50	84	93	94	97
51-64	86	94	96	95
65+	85	94	95	99
B. PRESIDENTIAL VOTING				
21-35	53	60	70	75
36-50	70	85	83	92
51-64	76	88	90	93
65+	71	82	85	97
C. POLITICAL TALK				
21-35	41	43	50	76
36-50	40	37	50	63
51-64	34	45	52	73
65+	23	37	39	72
[continued]				

TABLE 5: Continued

	Non- Members	Apolitical	Neo- Political	Political Clubs
D. POLITICAL WORK				
21-35	14	15	25	65
36-50	23	28	36	66
51-64	25	29	45	78
65+	19	31	30	81
E. POLITICAL MEETINGS				
21-35	13	10	35	65
36-50	14	19	32	71
51-64	15	20	28	74
65+	9	13	23	53
F. POLITICAL MONEY				
21-35	7	7	18	48
36-50	17	13	20	47
51-64	12	16	24	59
65+	4	9	15	39

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APPENDIX A

The following questions indexing political participation were analyzed in this study.

A. LOCAL VOTING

What about local elections -- Do you always vote in those, do you sometimes miss one, do you rarely vote, or do you never vote?

Responses dichotomized as: never vs. always-mostly-rarely.

B. PRESIDENTIAL VOTING

Can you tell me how you voted in the 1964 Presidential election -- did you vote for Johnson, Goldwater, another candidate, or perhaps you did not vote?

Dichotomized as: no vote vs. Johnson-Goldwater-other.

C. POLITICAL TALK

During elections do you ever try to talk with people about why they should vote for one of the parties or candidates -- do you do that often, sometimes, rarely, or never?

Dichotomized as: never vs. often-sometimes-rarely.

D. POLITICAL WORK

Have you ever done work for one of the parties or candidates -- is this in most elections, some elections, only a few, or have you never done such work?

Dichotomized as: never vs. most-some-few.

E. POLITICAL MEETINGS

In the past three or four years, have you attended any political meetings or rallies?

Responses were: yes vs. no.

F. POLITICAL MONEY

In the past three or four years, have you contributed money to a political party or candidate, or to any other political cause?

Responses were: yes vs. no.

APPENDIX B

Below are the minimum and maximum number of respondents per cell for each age/membership combination, as reported in Table 5. Variations reflect differences in the number of respondents who failed to respond to the different dependent variables.

	Non-Members	Apolitical	Neo-Political	Political Clubs
21-35	(359,365)	(219,222)	(296,300)	(50,52)
36-50	(263,265)	(164,167)	(376,386)	(88,90)
51-64	(245,247)	(198,203)	(163,170)	(59,61)
65+	(260,265)	(113,114)	(124,124)	(35)

APPENDIX C

Percentage of Each Age Group in Categories of Nonpolitical Voluntary Associations

	Non-Members	Apolitical	Neo-Political
21-35	41	25	34
36-50	33	21	46
51-64	40	32	28
65+	53	23	23
TOTAL	41	25	34